POWER UP
A digital magazine celebrating Powerful Providers everywhere.
Staying Food Secure Through Life Changes

By: Bob Bertsch

“"It was a mama who came in with her two young kids, one that was just a newborn,” Paolicelli recalled. “I remember them coming in, and I remember her being from a really rural area and talking about how drastically different it was moving to San Diego. They were a young military family. They hadn’t been in very long when the husband deployed, leaving the mama and her two children in a new city with little social support.”

Dr. Courtney Paolicelli still remembers the military family that showed her that it was not just service members who were making sacrifices for our country, but their families as well. Early in her career, Dr. Paolicelli was working in San Diego for WIC, a federal program providing supplemental nutrition for Women, Infants and Children, when that family came to her for help.

After almost 20 years as a registered dietitian, this family sticks with Paolicelli and fuels her desire to make sure families are nutrition secure. At that time, however, she didn’t have a deep connection to the military. In 2004, Dr. Paolicelli’s WIC agency had clinics at Naval Air Station North Island, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, and the Naval Medical Center. Paolicelli began running those clinics, and at one of them she met the military mom that stays in her memory.

“She was having trouble with breastfeeding. I remember her sitting in my office for a while, well past the typical appointment time, just talking and talking about strategies to overcome her challenges with breastfeeding, but also just helping her explore other resources that will be there to support her, given that she was in this new community where she didn’t know too many people.”

The family Paolicelli worked with in 2004 faced the same challenges many military families face today.

Permanent Change of Station (PCS) has been linked to food insecurity among military families. A study of food insecurity among active duty soldiers and their families conducted in 2020 found an Army household’s financial and job security were among the primary factors associated with a household becoming food insecure. A PCS can have a negative shock on a military family’s income. For households relying on income from a military spouse, that shock can be even more severe, especially considering the disadvantages military spouses already face in the civilian labor market.

According to Paolicelli, "If you don’t have that job stability, if you’re a dual-income house and then all of a sudden, one of the adults loses their job, whether it’s because of a PCS move or because a pandemic hits and somebody’s got to stay home with the kids, when you don’t have that job security or you don’t have that extra income, that’s when food security can really become an issue.”
One challenge today’s military families face that may not have been as daunting 20 years ago is rising costs. Between February 2022 and February 2023, food prices increased by 9.5% according to the USDA Economic Research Service’s Food Price Outlook. Additionally, the agency predicts that in 2023, all food prices will increase 7.5%. Data from the Federal Housing Finance Agency shows U.S. house prices rose 19.4% between February 2021 and February 2022. Paolicelli said those price increases can make things more difficult for military families going through a PCS: “You think about the rising cost of housing, the rising cost of food, the price we pay at the pump for gas, these costs just continue to increase and it’s just hard to keep pace with that, especially if you are a young family that’s growing. It’s a challenge.”

Paolicelli is familiar with food security programs through her current work as a program analyst in the School Meals Branch of the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), an agency which serves 66,000+ military-connected youth. She also previously worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, which administers many of the federal nutrition safety net programs. Additionally, she holds close ties to the military community from her time as a military Reserve as a dietitian and faculty at the Army’s master’s program in nutrition.

When military families move from one location to another, they may not be aware of the eligibility requirements and application process for federal food security in the state they are relocating to. Paolicelli noted: “For example, the eligibility guidelines and the process for applying for WIC benefits may look different in California than it does in Texas, than it does in North Carolina, than it does in Virginia.”

Nutrition assistance programs are administered by the states, and how each state administers them can be different. School meals programs can be different from state to state, or even school district to school district. Some states, like California, Colorado, and, most recently, New Mexico, have passed universal free school meals policies for state public schools. Within some states there are some districts that offer free school meals through a program called the Community Eligibility Provision. These and other differences can be challenging to navigate when military families are relocating from one location to another.

As Paolicelli explained, our national nutrition assistance programs are there to support military families, “so that when they’re making the sacrifices, they have the resources that they need to feed their families and put healthy food on the table.” She added: “We want to make sure that when our service members lay their heads down on their pillow at night, they can rest easy knowing that their family is taken care of.”

According to DoD, 24% of active duty members are food insecure. However, the 2023 report Food Insecurity Among Members of the Armed Forces and Their Dependents, published by the RAND Corporation, indicated food insecure military families were unlikely to use food assistance benefits like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food banks, SNAP, or Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA). The report identified multiple barriers to service members receiving assistance including the stigma surrounding asking for help, with some troops believing that if they seek out assistance their careers will be negatively impacted.

Paolicelli also noted that WIC research conducted by USDA previously found that non-military families either don’t know about the program or they don’t realize that they qualify for the program. “I think that’s something that even though that particular study was done in a civilian population and it wasn’t specific to military families, there’s a lot of parallels to what we see in the military because I have heard anecdotally that they don’t realize that they can apply for food assistance programs or they didn’t realize that they qualify for them.”

She sees the role military culture plays in keeping service members from seeking nutrition assistance differently than the authors of the RAND report. Paolicelli focuses less on stigma and more on self-sacrifice and the feeling that others need these food benefits more than the food insecure individual or family does. “I think that resonates in the military culture because that is part of our value system,” she said. “We are the line of defense. We are willing to sacrifice our own comforts for the greater good. I think that this mentality also is reflected perhaps in how we view some of these nutrition assistance programs.”

The barriers to seeking nutrition assistance may be even more significant for those serving in the National Guard and Reserves because they are not as closely connected to military installations, and they may think they are not eligible for some programs because they are not active duty. It’s a big concern for Paolicelli as a dietitian and a reserve Soldier. According to the U.S. Census Bureau data highlighted in a Washington Post article from 2021, Guard members and reservists “report more food insecurity than nearly any other group, regardless of household income, education, age or race.” Being aware of the challenges and barriers military families face is important to Paolicelli because it gives service providers the opportunity to think about how to connect with people and help them understand that they are eligible for nutrition assistance programs.

She recommends the Military Leaders Economic Security Toolkit available on MilitaryOneSource as a resource not just for military leaders, but for anyone who’d like to begin communicating more about food and economic security.

Paolicelli praised DoD for the attention they are paying and the action they are taking on food security for military families, an issue she feels deserves the attention and resources it is receiving. She appreciates the “whole team approach” the DoD is taking in addressing the issue. “We’re really strategically thinking about how we can intervene, how we can help support our military families in ways that will really make a difference,” Paolicelli said. “I do feel like the leadership is incredibly committed to improving this issue and in the case of food insecurity, making sure that every service-connected individual is able to put the healthiest food on the table that they can.”

While DoD works on addressing food security through policy and procedures, service providers can work directly with service members and military families who are or are at risk of becoming food insecure. In Paolicelli’s experience, it’s rare for someone to directly bring up their struggles to access food for themselves or their families, so service providers need to be ready to ask questions that could reveal whether someone is food insecure.

Once a client has screwed positive for food insecurity, Paolicelli recommends service providers immediately engage with them to provide help. “We can’t just give (printed) handouts,” she said. “It takes time to sit down and go through different websites or different applications and help them actually fill things out. I think to the extent that we have the time and the ability to actually walk them through the applications, or different applications and help them get connected to the programs.”

In cases where service providers are referring clients to another resource, Paolicelli believes “warm handoffs” (making sure an individual or family knows who they are being referred to, when their appointment is, and what to expect) are especially important with sensitive issues like food insecurity. These relatively small actions reduce the amount of stress added to the already stressful experience of being food insecure.

Research has shown that food insecurity is associated with a 257% higher risk of anxiety and a 253% higher risk of depression. The relative risk of mental illness from being food insecure is almost threefold that of losing a job. Reducing that stress and anxiety can be an important part of addressing food insecurity.
Paolicelli pointed to the Defense Commissary Agency’s (DeCA) commitment to being more explicit in labeling their WIC-approved foods in the commissaries as an example of reducing stress and anxiety for families experiencing food insecurity. “It sounds like such a little thing, but it makes such a huge difference for a momma who’s carrying around two little kids and a newborn and trying to shop herself in the commissary,” she said. “Anything to make her life easier and make her shopping experience more pleasant and help her out, anything like that is obviously in full support of our families.”

If you’ve ever had a credit card denied in the checkout line, you might know how families using nutrition assistance benefits at the commissary or grocery store might feel when an item in their cart cannot be purchased using their benefits. Being called out as someone who needs nutrition assistance can be embarrassing, stigmatizing, and stressful.

Thinking about the stress military families experiencing food insecurity face, Paolicelli’s thoughts return to the WIC office in San Diego, where, as a young dietitian, she encountered that military mom who needed some extra support.

“I can still see that woman’s face and I remember her sitting in the chair, holding a little baby and a little toddler running around. It struck me that this life, the life of the military family, it’s about sacrifice and it is about putting your own needs aside for the good of our country. I guess, up to that point, I had always conceptualized sacrifices being exclusive to the service member himself or herself. It was really at that point that I realized it’s not just about the service member, it’s about the entire family.”

The sacrifices our military families make should not include their food or their health. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy Patricia Montes Barron said: “We ask an awful lot of our families, and especially our children who have to move from place to place. Shouldn’t we provide them with the very best care that we can? A military family should not have any challenges with food……We have a plethora of resources; we just need to make sure that our families are aware of them and can take advantage of them.”

Leah’s Pantry, a California-based nonprofit offering community nutrition and food security programs, developed the term “Trauma-Informed Nutritional Security” to describe how they approach their work through the lens of trauma and resilience. They’ve adapted the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Principles of Trauma Informed Care into these priorities for nutrition security work:

- Client dignity, voice and needs
- Stress reduction
- Choice and autonomy
- Food in support of mental and physical health
- Culturally-relevant and accessible resources
- Leveling of power dynamics in interactions
Deep in the heart of rural Minnesota, there is a food shelf that has undergone an impressive transformation. The Wantonwan County Food Shelf in St. James, which was once a small 600-square-foot space in a social services building, is now a 6,000-square-foot facility. It has shed the drab, unwelcoming interior prevalent in thousands of food pantries across the nation, and has become like a grocery store—a brightly colored, well-organized, and attractive shopping destination supporting local people who find themselves facing food insecurity.

This is happening across Minnesota thanks to the SuperShelf program. Transforming food pantries into spaces that look and feel and operate like grocery stores is their specialty, backed by evidence-based research.

These transformations provide a measure of respect that goes beyond the provision of food for the individuals who shop at each SuperShelf. The Extension staff and partners behind this program believe in promoting autonomy for people to make their own dietary choices, with a special emphasis on healthy food. They do not believe in food policing for those with chronic diseases or health disparities, or for anyone. The volunteers, staff, and partners have been working hard to promote this philosophy and to support the transformation of the food shelf.

Back in 2012, a staff member from HealthPartners, one of the founding organizations of Minnesota’s SuperShelf program, was helping a member from her church move out of her apartment when she noticed Esther had an abundance of pancake mix and syrup in her cupboard. It turned out every time she visited the food shelf, a box of pancake mix and a bottle of syrup were pre-packed in the box she picked up. Esther wasn’t eating all the pancake mix and syrup they were giving her. The HealthPartners employee traced it back to the food shelf, thinking there had to be a better way.

Similarly, Extension Educator Dianne Davis-Kenning recalls a visit that impacted her: “We used to do home visits and one of them was a young mom who had . . . 24 [or] 25 of those commodity cans of meat stacked up and didn’t know how to use them. Her family wouldn’t eat them. She was just warming them up, and I said, ‘well, that’s probably why they’re not eating it!’” So Dianne came up with some recipes and pretty soon the mom and family were able to use up all their cans.

After her experience with this young mom who needed to understand how to use her canned meat, Dianne recalled thinking there has to be a better way.

The Start of SuperShelf

It turns out that others agreed. Partnerships were formed between a food shelf, a food bank, non-profits, the local healthcare system, the University of Minnesota Department of Family Medicine, and UMN Extension. Research was applied, and the SuperShelf program was integrated into UMN Extension programming in 2018. Prior to this, the first transformation took place in 2013 at Valley Outreach food shelf.

The founders wanted to offer a new way to run a food shelf. The program aims to provide healthy food options for people in need and help them make better choices about what they eat—all while creating an experience that is welcoming and prioritizes dignity, respect, and support. Today the SuperShelf program in Minnesota boasts 44 certified program partners and counting.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Once a food shelf decides to become a SuperShelf, the entire space is transformed. Brightly colored paint and clear, attractive signage designed by a graphic artist are some of the most dramatic transformations that occur when a food shelf partners with the SuperShelf program. Shelving with organized sections and clear labels available in multiple languages according to the local needs round out the welcoming design transformations.

Like a grocery store, SuperShelf’s food shelves are laid out in a specific order. Fruits and vegetables come first, followed by dairy, proteins, grains, cooking and baking, boxed and canned meals, snacks, and beverages. The idea is to make healthier choices more visible and accessible to people who are shopping at the food shelf.

Also like a grocery store, people using the SuperShelf can walk in and choose the groceries they need and want. (No more unwanted boxes of pancake mix and bottles of syrup lining people’s pantries, unless they want them.) SuperShelf also provides a cooking and baking section, something that almost 90% of food shelves do not have. This section includes recipes and ingredients to encourage people to start cooking at home. With SuperShelf’s approach, people can have access to healthier food options and learn how to prepare nutritious meals for themselves and their families.

The impact of these changes on the people they serve—the customers—is incredible.
The Power of Extension

The Minnesota SuperShelf program is now a team of 8 lead consultants plus 11 local consultants led by an Extension Educator that are working to improve food security and access across the state. The program has grown to 44 certified food shelves across the state with more than 25 in the queue waiting to be transformed. 

SuperShelf’s story is a powerful example of how Extension works with partners to address critical issues. Extension is deeply embedded in communities across the nation, adding local knowledge, evidence based practices, and weaving relationships and resources for transformative change that improves the quality of life for the communities they serve.

This commitment helped the partners create a better way to run a food shelf—one that prioritizes dignity and respect for both the individual and the community. The individual experiences dignity and respect as the ability to choose the groceries they prefer in an environment that feels welcoming and fits the cultural norm of a grocery store.

The community experiences dignity and respect as a reflection of local needs, such as ensuring certain locally consumed products are available and that signage is in the preferred languages of those who live in the community.

Collaborative approaches like the SuperShelf program have the potential to transform the way we think about food assistance and provide a more holistic way to address food security issues for all families.

A veteran in need turned food shelf employee: Robert’s Story

“I had gotten sober, and I was about three months sober at the time. I was looking for something to occupy my time. And my social worker said I should try to volunteer at the food shelf: ‘You’re a giving person, you’re always helping people.’ So I volunteered at the food shelf two days a week, for a few hours. And then it got to be more and more, and I really enjoyed it. [When] we started a mobile food shelf they offered me a part-time job, paid. I thought, ‘How wonderful is this? I like being here, I like serving my community and now I’m getting paid!’

[While volunteering], I was able to counsel people that were suffering, who were still using. They would see me at the food shelf, presenting myself as a sober person, they’d say, ‘wow, if he can do it, I can do it.’

And not only that, when they come in we don’t pass any judgment on them. It is completely relaxed and we make everybody feel comfortable. The first time I had to use the food shelf . . . the [person working there] said, ‘I have three jobs, how many do you have?’ I thought, ‘That will never happen when I’m here.’ I will always go above and beyond to make everybody feel comfortable. It’s their food, not ours. We’re just facilitators of the food. It fulfills my soul to be able to reach out and help people and make them feel comfortable. I never want anyone coming to our food shelf feeling embarrassed.

I do run across [other veterans and Reserve members]. I just had a Vietnam vet [at] the food shelf yesterday. We have become friends—he was in the Navy, so we kind of harassed each other a little bit, you know how the services do that. [The food shelf has] made a huge difference in my life. It has given me a sense of being in the community. I have no stress in my life. I’m at complete peace in what I’m doing and have joy in what I’m doing. And then when you’re doing the mobile food shelf you get to meet all these older folks and they just look forward to seeing you.

When I first went to the food shelf, it wasn’t being run with very compassionate people, let’s put it that way. They were very rude. I was under the influence [yet] I was never rude—I was always respectful. I didn’t like you, they didn’t give you decent food. Now, since we turned it into a SuperShelf, everybody gets to [choose their food], it is like going shopping and it is a pleasant experience. I didn’t feel embarrassed anymore but it was humbling to go there [at first] and get food and then have people at that time who weren’t very compassionate.

I helped switch it over to a SuperShelf. We painted it [and] we moved shelves. It’s been quite the blessing to our community.”
Everyone’s Hurdles Look Different -  
A True Story From a Military Mom

By: Laura Osborne | To protect privacy, all names mentioned in this article have been altered.

The author of this article is a mom whose son was diagnosed with severe sensory processing disorder (SPD) as a very young child. SPD occurs when children struggle to make sense of the information they receive through their senses. This can result in hypo- and/or hyper-responsiveness to stimuli (e.g., noises, textures, tastes, etc.). In other words, a child with SPD may respond in ways that are viewed by their caretaker as disproportionate to the circumstances. For example, a child who is hyper-responsive may scream loudly and meltdown when their face gets wet.

Money was tight. School lunches were expensive. Forty dollars a month doesn’t sound like much now, but it was the water bill then. Forty dollars a month, literally thrown in the trash can because my six-year-old refused to eat the food. Too mushy. Too bland. Too hot. Too cold. Too smushed together. And yet, apparently it was too “against the rules” to tell my son he wasn’t allowed to choose the strawberry milk from the school lunch line because, you know, Red 40.

Hence, his recurring packed lunch of two rice cakes, baby carrots, a sliced apple, and a v8 Splash. I got a note from his teacher before Halloween. “Regan’s packed lunches do not meet the school’s dietary requirements. Please send him lunches from all of the food groups or he will not be allowed to participate in any school activities.” According to my son’s unreliable witness testimony, those school lunches—sans strawberry milk and dessert—were tossed directly into the trash. Sometimes tray and all because, well, SPD.

Our electricity was turned off for a day here and there in November. I’m not saying it was directly connected to the forty dollars sent to the school for lunch. It may have been the consequence of some other questionable parenting decision, like buying the little plastic tray of pencils and erasers and the tiny toy camera because he had been complaining to his classmate about how he couldn’t afford any of his own. Sometimes, these things just happened.

We were raising four children on a Sergeant’s salary, gambling on therapy co-pays, weighted vests and blankets (before you could buy them at Walmart), and sit contentedly in the front of the grocery cart. Any grocery trip that exceeded the two-rice-cake limit required childcare. The bright fluorescent lights, unpredictable music, the people—with all their words and smells, the bright soup cans, the starting “Lesley to check out, please!” announcements... It was all too much for a toddler with hyporesponsive, sometimes hyperresponsive (who can predict these things?) sensory processing disorder that affected all eight systems. The desire to stem and swim in the sensory soup known as The Commissary would be too tempting.

To appease the school, we paid for school lunch. As predicted, the “inability to follow directions” notes increased in direct proportion to the decrease in notes that read “send a lunch from all the food groups.” According to my son’s unreliable witness testimony, those school lunches—sans strawberry milk and dessert—were tossed directly into the trash. Sometimes tray and all because, well, SPD.

My boy used rice cakes as teethers. He’d sink his gums into the edible-to-some round sponge, sprinkled with white cheddar (no other flavor would do), and sit contentedly in the front of the grocery cart. Any grocery trip that exceeded the two-rice-cake limit required childcare. The bright fluorescent lights, unpredictable music, the people—with all their words and smells, the bright soup cans, the starting “Lesley to check out, please!” announcements... It was all too much for a toddler with hyporesponsive, sometimes hyperresponsive (who can predict these things?) sensory processing disorder that affected all eight systems. The desire to stem and swim in the sensory soup known as The Commissary would be too tempting.

To this teacher, my kindergartener—covered in white cheddar rice-cake dust—was the epitome of malnourishment. To me, two rice cakes, a handful of baby carrots, maybe an apple slice if he could focus long enough to eat one, and whatever v8 he could down after the “stab the straw into a bag” loss splashed onto the table was a win! Who am I kidding? He licked that spilled v8 off the table.
Military Families and Food Security

By: Bob Bertsch

Like many of the issues that impact military and civilian families, food security is complex.

The Department of Defense (DoD) recognizes that many of the issues that impact military family readiness are complex. These issues can only be addressed from multiple perspectives and by a wide range of people and organizations inside and outside of the Federal Government. DoD refers to the network of people and organizations that address issues related to military family readiness as the Military Family Readiness System (MFRS).

In their report Strengthening the Military Family Readiness System for a Changing American Society, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine’s Committee on the Well-Being of Military Families found the MFRS could be improved by encouraging community engagement and meaningful collaboration, and building community capacity to support military family well-being and readiness.

The MFRS is really helpful as a container for the work we are or could be doing to address complex issues like food security, but it is only a concept. The MFRS will positively impact military families only when the people and organizations within it communicate, engage, and collaborate effectively, and that takes practice.

We can help weave and strengthen the MFRS by practicing, individually and together, the skills we need for meaningful collaboration, for building community capacity, and for facilitating community engagement. If we developed our skills and put them into practice on complex issues like food security, here’s what it could look like.

The complex issue of food security for military families can only be addressed from multiple perspectives and by a wide range of people and organizations on installations and in communities. What Practicing Connection skills are you using to support military families?

Applying Practicing Connection to Military Family Food Security: Potential Impacts

1. Service providers know that DoD sees the MFRS as critical to addressing complex issues like food security.

2. Using community engagement skills, service providers engage military families to learn about their needs, any barriers to nutrition security, and assets they have used to become more food secure.

3. Using skills for linking networks, service providers seek out opportunities to work with others to address food security.

4. Using communication and relationship-building skills, service providers reach out to and connect with others to learn how food security is currently being addressed in the community on and off installation.

5. Recognizing the need to build community capacity to address food security, service providers use their communication and engagement skills to approach installation leadership about engaging in food security as a community issue.
Celebrating Your Work

By: Brigitte Scott

This issue’s collection of articles demonstrates the ways in which a family’s experience with food insecurity is an intersectional one. As with race, class, gender, ability, ethnicity, and sexuality, food insecurity is complicated by the confluence of the social, institutional, environmental, economic, and political factors individuals and families navigate. For the 24% of military families experiencing food insecurity, we must also consider the unique experiences of relocation, deployment, separation, transition, reintegration, and the range of opportunities and challenges active-duty military service can present.

The goals of the Military Family Readiness System are at once practical and ambitious. A strong network of family service providers working together across programs, services, and agencies can provide optimal support to our military families. This can (and does) look like breaking down barriers and creating new ways of working in order to collaborate and connect across agencies, departments, contexts, localities, and disciplines in meaningful and often measurable, demonstrable ways. At the same time, there is deeper work required, work that is more subtle and quiet and not at all easy to track or measure: it is the value and impact of bringing whole-person and whole-family approaches to your work through intersectional perspectives, curiosity, and awareness.

With this issue of PowerUp we celebrate you, our military family service providers, for doing the quiet and perhaps unseen, internal work of engaging the personal and professional perspectives required to provide whole-person and whole-family support. You engage this intersectional mindset when you see a child’s sensorial differences in the various contexts of food security, school-based food and behavior requirements, and family finances and military service. You utilize this perspective when supporting a parent’s food security concerns while her spouse is deployed. You prioritize this approach when you create programs and services acknowledging that food security means having nutritious, meaningful, and culturally appropriate food choices offered in an environment of respect and dignity for diverse family constructs.

It’s difficult to see the complexity of the work you do and simultaneously see through a client’s specific need to the range of lived experiences that intersect and mediate that need. Each time you do that work you open a door to the Military Family Readiness System for that client, shedding light on their lived experiences and enabling expanded and expansive supports. Each time you do that work, you support the health, well-being, and readiness of that family. OneOp celebrates you and all you do each day in service to our nation’s military families. Thank you.
We believe that smart and connected people can change lives.

That’s why OneOp is committed to providing free online learning opportunities for family service professionals. Providers are powerful when they work together as a ready, knowledgeable, and networked community. This power transforms the military families they serve.

Be a powerful provider.

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